

TESTIMONY OF HOMER STAVES
TO THE
MONTANA HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
FOR HB 24
MARCH 8, 2013

Good Afternoon. My name is Homer Staves, I am a fifth generation Montanan, I was born in Missoula, grew up in Polson, earned a BA and MBA in Business from the University in Missoula, spent 8 years raising cherries on Flathead Lake and thirty years working for Kampgrounds of America in Billings. Since 2000 I have owned Staves Consulting Inc., a Montana corporation specializing in RV parks and campgrounds as well as related recreation throughout North America. I reside in Billings with my wife of fifty years and we spend the summer helping our sons operate the KOA Kampground we own in Whitefish. I currently serve as the President of COAM, the Campground Owner's Association of Montana as well as the President of the Montana – Wyoming KOA Owners Association. I am here to speak for HB 24, an act creating the state parks and recreation board.

In 1965 the United States Congress passed legislation creating the Land and Water Conservation Fund or LWCF. The act stated the purpose of the LWCF was, "to help preserve, develop, and assure access to outdoor recreation facilities to strengthen the health of U.S. citizens". It was touted as a method to provide money to both the federal land agencies for land acquisition and to the states for outdoor recreation. Because of this expected flow of new money from the federal government the 1965 legislature moved control of the Montana park system from the Highway Commission to the Montana Fish and Game Commission.

My father served as Chairman of the Fish and Game Commission for three of the eight years he was on the commission, between 1961 and 1969. He was Chairman during 1964 and 1965 when the transition was made. During this time I went to work in Billings, for Kampgrounds of America which soon became the largest chain of campgrounds in the United States. Dad and I had a lot of discussions about the role of the state campgrounds and KOA. At that time the purpose of the state campgrounds was to provide campsites for Montana hunters and fishermen. KOA's niche was the person using a RV to travel down the highway. In fact the Montana parks did not even charge a camping fee until 1969. However over the years the use of campgrounds nationwide has changed and today the Montana park campgrounds are used more often by campers who are not hunting and fishing than by those who are. Across the United States, state owned campgrounds are now a definite part of the tourism industry.

In spite of the original intentions of Congress to split the LWCF funds equally between federal lands and state needs, the money appropriated for the states has historically only been about 25% of the total. Even with that shortfall, the Montana Parks Department has performed a great service for the residents of our state.

The property owned by governments also has to serve an economic purpose in order to improve the economy and create jobs. Much of the federal and state owned

property in Montana is used for agricultural grazing and or mineral recovery. Agriculture and mining have long been considered the major industries in our state. Tourism however has been one of the top three economic engines for the state. Yellowstone and Glacier are key attractions to get people to come to Montana but once they are here it is the natural beauty that keeps people in the state for a longer period of time. This is the area where state parks, as a tourist entity, can help grow both the economy and jobs within the state. This can best be done with a new type of organizational structure utilizing Montana residents as advisors to help state employees determine the most effective way to increase revenue and jobs for the state while still preserving and protecting our historical and natural resources.

It does not make any difference if a child spends a day visiting historical attractions like Virginia City, Nevada City or Bannack. The same family can benefit from camping at any one of the state owned campgrounds or a private park like my KOA Kampground in Whitefish. Their getaway could be a hike in the mountains in the west or rock hounding in eastern Montana. Today's family really doesn't care whether a facility is owned by the state, the federal government or a private company. They are more concerned with the quality of the experience. All of us in the outdoor recreation industry share the same customers. I even have campers at my park who camped the previous night at a Wal-Mart parking lot. We all need to work together to make sure the visitor to our state as well as the resident has a good experience wherever they go and whatever they choose to do.

The present Fish Wildlife and Park Commission has their hands full with wolves, bison, and endangered species and have limited time and experience with the operation and needs of the Parks Division. These problems did not exist for the eight years my father served on the Commission. He really thought moving the state parks into the Fish and Game was a great idea. When they created that organizational plan there were no off road vehicles or snowmobiles to worry about. There were no regulations for watercraft and most of the trails for hiking had been created by either wild animals or the Civil Conservation Corps. If Dad was still alive today, I know he would agree that the time has come to try a new organizational plan that better meets the needs of today's residents and out of state visitors. We need an organization that will improve the outdoor experience and a plan that moves children from the TV to the great outdoors, be it parks, historical places like Virginia City, private and public campgrounds or other outdoor activities.

I totally support HB 24. I think this approach will greatly enhance the opportunity for meaningful partnerships between state and federal government agencies as well as the private sector and the general public. This improved cooperation will result in more jobs in the state, higher tourist revenues, and a better experience for resident and nonresident alike. It should also increase the fees paid by users for the state parks thereby reducing the amount of tax funds needed to maintain all of the facilities. All of this can be accomplished without creating any new departments in our state government and without any additional state employees.